

July 28, 2021

**VIA ELECTRONIC SUBMISSION AND MAIL**

**Chairman Gerald E. Connolly  
United States House of Representatives, Committee on Oversight and Reform  
Subcommittee on Government Operations  
2157 Rayburn Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515-6143**

**Dear Chairman Connolly and Members of the Subcommittee on Government Operations,**

On behalf of Code for America, we were honored to be part of the discussion on June 30th titled “Catalyst for Change: State and Local IT After the Pandemic” and remain committed to doing all we can to help government at all levels be prepared to meet moments of crisis. In that spirit, we have answered the questions provided to us on the path forward for digital transformation at the state and local level with a focus on practical solutions based on our ten-year history of digital service delivery in all corners of the country. Please know we are here for further discussion and partnership to assist the committee in any way possible.

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**Question 1:**

*How can the federal government incentivize state and local governments to move to more modern, user-friendly digital services?*

To begin, we are strong supporters of the State and Local Digital Service Act of 2021 (S.1957). Government offices like the US Digital Service, General Services Administration/Technology Transformation Services, and all the state and local digital service teams are key partners for innovation within government agencies. It has been especially true throughout the pandemic that state and local innovation centers and digital teams stepped in to do all they could to bring services and communication online to connect with constituents. However, it was also learned that more capacity and digital know-how is needed to fully change systems to prepare for better, more responsive online services to all communities. As such, we support any legislation that increases technology capacity and talent at all levels of government.

In addition to technology talent, the federal government could encourage, resource, and role model fundamental aspects of a people-centered government.

This effort starts with listening to real people. For instance, what if every government service had to be designed with a working group of people with lived experience? Imagine how powerful it would be if parolees were able to help design the system for future parolees. Or, if a mother who has utilized programs like WIC (the Women, Infants, & Children Supplemental Nutrition Program) and TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) could offer her counsel on how to improve systems for the next generation. Governments at all levels should find ways to incorporate the voices of people who use government services into the way both services and policies are designed. From our research, if people with lived experience were always included in the design of programs and policies, governments would have more effective systems that meet the needs of an evolving population.

Once a system is in place, it is imperative to measure what matters. As an example, what if governments measured participation gaps by protected class to understand how equitably they are serving different groups? What if every agency had customer satisfaction surveys to understand people's concerns? Put simply, you can't solve a problem that you don't know about. As a result, current delivery and outreach systems perpetuate injustices often unknowingly. This has contributed to the inequalities we see today that impact people with disabilities, certain races, rural or urban residents, and any number of marginalized communities. In order for governments to know how services are distributed, they must measure what matters.

After understanding real people and developing clear measures, we have long known that solutions must be built iteratively, and we must carve out flexibility so that state and local governments can experiment and continuously improve. This is a key concept known as "agile" in the private sector—it simply means you start small, build up, and keep iterating as you go. It's important to realize that all the great software products we use in modern society today—from smartphones to online banking to streaming services—are the result of rapid iteration. Private sector companies are releasing a new version of their software every few months, if not weeks. This process allows companies to surface problems early, understand key client barriers, and further customize so that products work for a broader customer base. We strongly encourage government to build in this way, taking in feedback and iterating to make services more user-friendly. Perhaps, legislation could encourage an iterative process for key deliverables from agencies, and/or create more pilot to permanent directives for programs. In addition, policymakers could encourage agencies and community groups on the front lines to provide implementation reports in the lead up to key program reauthorizations.

We recognize that the ideas above may be a bit outside the norm, but we also know that there is a new momentum for change as governments have had to do things differently for the last 18 months. Some options to consider would be language for iterative development through reporting, or attaching conditions to funding, or promulgating policies. Overall, we are hopeful that with encouragement and guidance from federal leaders, the mindset for centering real



people, measuring what matters, and thoughtful software development in government has a real potential for change.

#### Question 2:

*How do we ensure that state and local governments do not revert back to business as usual, and leverage lessons learned during the pandemic to improve services?*

First, we are supportive of the bipartisan effort to reconstitute and reform the U.S. Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (ACIR). A forum for intergovernmental dialogue and a neutral analytical commission could assist with surfacing problems states face across the country and work together with the federal government to develop solutions. Furthermore, this kind of forum can help foster relationships and a more active ecosystem of sharing best practices across states and regions of the country.

It's critical to recognize the importance of the next six months for solidifying expectations about digital delivery at every level of government. There is an opportunity to both name and require a base level of customer service by every state government across the country. As an example, Congress could require every state to create a responsive website so that every person in America has the ability to communicate with its state government, or there could be a mobile access requirement for programs, particularly those that impact low income or rural communities where access may only be through a mobile phone. There is no silver bullet to this solution, instead a consistent commitment to improving services by asking every time a new program is created and/or renewed, how can we make this program simple, accessible, easy to use, and successfully deliver equitable outcomes.

#### Question 3:

*What other resources, besides funding, should Congress and the federal government use to accelerate this type of digital transformation at the state and local level?*

It may not have to be an either/or around funding or not funding. In many ways, we suggest that funding be guided with stipulations that encourage the best-in-class digital transformation according to the principles above. The State and Local Digital Services Act actually does this—not by writing blank checks, but rather by tying funding to improvements in approaches and outcomes.

One could also look at the work that Technology Transformation Services at the General Services Administration (including 18F) and the US Digital Service are doing to continue to support state and local governments, like developing resources, shared services, guides, and

building a community around the growing digital services field. These efforts to coordinate across agencies and support states can assist in many critical parts of technology service delivery, especially to the most vulnerable among us. Let's take public benefits systems (e.g., SNAP, TANF, Medicaid, WIC, and LIHEAP) for instance:

- There are often coordination challenges and sometimes conflicting guidance around data usage across various federal agencies such as Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, the Administration for Children and Families, and the USDA Food and Nutrition Service, which inadvertently discourage states from sharing data. The federal government can work across agencies to issue joint shared guidance and policy that clarifies challenges states face. Note that efforts by Congress such as the Restore the Partnership Act to reconstitute and reform the U.S. Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (ACIR) could help various governmental bodies work together more efficiently and effectively.
- States are left to develop their own language, which can lead to Americans struggling to fill out complicated forms. Rather, sharing guidance about language with simplified verbiage that reduces errors and confusion could help improve outcomes, without increasing cost. Model language (such as around race, ethnicity, and immigration status) that incorporates the latest research on how to obtain accurate data and increase likelihood that applications submit information for correct processing, can be issued by the federal government.
- Many best-in-class systems we have seen in states utilize digital notifications such as SMS text messaging to communicate with clients. The federal government could build shared services that allow states to utilize text messaging on a federal platform, without reinventing the wheel in each state.

In the above example, states are in a situation where they must implement the same federal programs 50 different ways. While states commonly express the desire to customize their systems, common shared services, components, language, and policy environment can help accelerate state IT improvements without incurring additional cost, all while improving the experience for all Americans who use government systems.

#### Question 4:

*How can Congress help state and local governments incorporate user-centered design into their policy and program implementation?*



One of the simplest, yet most powerful, methods for understanding humans who use the services that governments provide is just to try the service yourself. We strongly encourage each and every elected official to try to use the services that their constituents use, from applying for Medicaid to getting a driver's license or a camping permit at a National Park. There's no better way to understand services. This experience provides a firsthand account of the barriers in service delivery and gaps in implementation that exist.

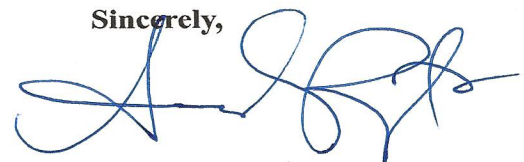
With this firsthand experience, a natural extension would be to stipulate that state and local government leadership must try their services as well. Better yet, Congress could consider mandating that services should be tested by people with lived experience throughout the entire lifecycle of the program, rather than simply after software is built. Incorporating people with lived experience from the initial design through delivery and implementation and all the way into maintenance whenever the system is updated would be a big step towards incorporating human-centered design.

Lastly, in the private sector, companies survey customers to understand needs, barriers, and opportunities for better service. A good first step would be to develop systems of customer feedback for agencies and programs. The federal government could encourage the creation of State Client Success Teams charged with surveying clients or requiring client surveys for specific programs. The compilation of responses could then be used to inform future reauthorizations and/or program development.

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As mentioned above and in my testimony, we stand ready to help and deeply committed to this work. Please don't hesitate to reach out to us if we can be of assistance again.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Amanda Renteria', with a stylized, flowing script.

**Amanda Renteria**

**CEO**

**Code for America**